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Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6373
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY DJAKARTA
AMCONSUL HONG KONG
AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MANILA
USMISSION USNATO
AMEMBASSY PARIS
USLO PEKING
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
AMEMBASSY TAIPEI
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMEMBASSY VIENTIENE
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
DIA WASHDC
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CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: UR, US, VN, XC, XE
SUBJ: SOVIET POSITION ON VIETNAMESE-KHMER BORDER CONFLICT

REF: (A) MOSCOW 17182, (B) NATO 00100

SUMMARY: MOSCOW OPENLY SUPPORTS VIETNAM IN THE VIETNAMESE-
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KHMER BORDER DISPUTE. SOVIETS KNOW THAT VIETNAM WILL
DECIDE ON ITS OWN COURSE OF ACTION AND HAS THE MILITARY-
POLITICAL CAPABILITIES TO "HANDLE" KAMPUCHEA. HOWEVER,
MOSCOW WOULD NOT WELCOME A VIETNAMESE ESCALATION OF THE
FIGHTING THAT COULD INVITE VIGOROUS CHINESE RESPONSE
AND CONSEQUENT FURTHER DETERIORATION IN SINO-SOVIET
RELATIONS. THE UNATTRACTIVENESS OF THIS SCENARIO,

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AMONG OTHER FACTORS, IS BEHIND PRESENT SOVIET STRESS
ON NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT. END SUMMARY.

1. MOSCOW, AS IN ITS APPROACH TO SEA REGION IN
GENERAL, WILL CAREFULLY CALIBRATE ITS POSTURE ON
VIETNAMESE-KHMER BORDER CONFLICT WITH VIETNAMESE
PPLICY. SOVIET PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COMMENT ECHOES
HANOI'S JUSTIFACTIOON OF VIETNAMESE MILITARY ACTIONS
AND ANNOUNCEMENTS ON THE BORDER DISPUTE. WE ASSUME
THAT HANOI IS BRIEFING MOSCOW ON DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE CONFLICT AND ON ITS EFFORTS TO GARNER SYMPATHY
FOR ITS POSITION ABROAD. GENERAL YEPISHEV'S VISIT
TO HANOI LAST FALL AND GENERAL GIAP'S UNPBULCIZED
VISIT TO MOSCOW LAST MONTH MAY HAVE BEEN LINKED WITH
THE ESCALATION IN THE BORDER FIGHTING AND POSSIBLE
VIETNAMESE CONCERNS ABOUT CHINESE INTENTIONS IF THE
CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA WIDENS.

2. WHILE OPENLY SUPPORTING THE VIETNAMESE POSITION,
THE SOVIET UNION IS ALSO STRESSING THE DESIRABILITY
OF A NEGOTIATED BORDER SETTLEMENT. MOSCOW'S
PREFERENCE FOR A NEGOTIATED SETTLMENT IS MOTIVATED BY:
-- POSSIBILITY THAT VIETNAMESE MILITARY MOVES
AGAINST CAMBODIA COULD INCREASE EFFORTS TO
STRENGTHEN DEFENSE CAPABILITIES AND HEIGHTEN FEARS ABOUT VIET-
NAMESE INTENTIONS AMONG ASEAN NATIONS;
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-- SOVIET DESIRE THAT VIETNAMESE CONCENTRATE
ON INTERNAL RECONSTRUCTION AND "SOCIALIST"
TRANSFORMATION RATHER THAN EXTERNAL CONFLICTS
AS A MEANS TO STRENGTHEN HANOI'S LONG-TERM INFLUENCE
IN ASIA;
-- CONCERN THAT, IF VIETNAMESE OPERATIONS SPILL
TOO FAR INTO CAMBODIA, STRONG SOVIET SUPPORT FOR
THE SANCTITY OF BORDERS IN ETHIOPIA, EUROPE AND
WITH RESPECT TO THE USSR ITSELF WILL BE CALLED INTO
QUESTION.
CHIEF OF USA INSTITUTE ASIA SECTION VLADIMIR LUKIN
TOLD EMBOFF JAN. 4 THAT VIETNAM, AS WITH POST-1917
SOVIET UNION, NEEDS SEVERAL DECADES TO DEVELOP ITSELF
INTERNALLY BEFORE EMBARKING ON AN "ACTIVE" FOREIGN
POLICY. HE EXPRESSED HOPE THAT THE CURRENT BORDER
FIGHTING WOULD REMAIN LOCALIZED AND NOT EXPAND INTO
A WIDER WAR.

3. WHILE ENTERTAINING THIS VIEW, SOVIETS AT SAME
TIME KNOW THAT VIETNAM WILL DETERMINE ITS OWN COURSE
OF ACTION VIS-A-VIS THE KHMERS BASED ON HANOI'S
OWN ASSESSMENT OF ITS INTERESTS. THE SOVIETS ALSO

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KNOW THAT THEY NEED NOT CONCERN THEMSELVES ABOUT
VIETNAMESE MILITARY OR POLITICAL CAPABILITIES IN
HANDLING A LOCALIZED CONFLICT WITH KAMPUCHEA IN
VIETNAM'S OWN "NECK OF THE WOODS". MOSCOW'S SUPPORT
FOR VIETNAM IS REINFORCED BY ITS POOR RELATIONS WITH
THE PHNOM PENH REGIME, WHICH HAS SPURNED SOVIET
GESTURES AND PROPAGANDIZED AGINST THE SOVIET UNION.
PRIVATELY, SOME SOVIET OFFICIALS DESCRIBE THE KHMER
LEADERSHIP AS CHAUVINISTIC, CHINESE-CONTROLLED AND
"CRAZY". SOVIET MFA VIETNAM DESK OFFICER KHAMIDOULIN
RECALLED THAT RECENT KHMER LEADERS WHO ATTEMPTED TO
WHIP UP ANTI-VIETNAMESE SENTIMENT (HE MENTIONED
LON NOL AND SIHANOUK) HAD BEEN OVERTHROWN. A MAJOR
FACTOR THAT COULD SERVE TO QUALIFY FULL SOVIET SUPPORT
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FOR VIETNAM'S COURSE OF ACTION, HOWEVER, WOULD BE A
VIGOROUS ANTI-VIETNAMESE CHINESE REACTION, WHICH COULD
BE PRECIPITATED BY POSSIBLE MOVES BY HANOI TO
WIDEN THE CONFLICT (DISCUSSED PARA FIVE).

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4. THE CHINA ANGLE: SOVIET PRIVATE AND PUBLIC COMMENTS ALSO COINCIDE IN CRITICALLY IDENTIFYING THE CHINESE WITH THE KHMER POSITION. KHAMIDULINE BLAMED CHINA FOR KHMER INTRANSIGENCE ON BORDER NEGOTIATIONS WITH VIETNAM. LUKIN CLAIMED THERE ARE "MANY " CHINESE ADVISORS PERFORMING BOTH MILITARY AND CIVILIAN FUNCTIONS IN KAMPUCHEA. LUKIN EXPRESSED PLEASURE AT CHINESE DISCOMFIT OVER THE VIETNAMESE-KHMER CONFLICT BUT PREDICTED THAT THE CHINESE WOULD CONTINUE CONFIDENTIAL

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EFFORTS TO EASE TENSIONS AND TO ENCOURAGE A SETTLEMENT.

5. ALTHOUGH OUR SOVIET CONTACTS DO NOT MENTION THIS, WE BELIEVE THAT MOSCOW WOULD NOT WELCOME A SITUATION IN WHICH A VIETNAMESE-KHMER WAR WOULD MOTIVATE A STRONG ANTI-VIETNAMESE CHINESE REACTION. THIS WOULD NECESSITATE IN TURN A SOVIET RESPONSE, AND PERHAPS RESULT IN A DETERIORATION IN SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS AT A TIME WHEN DIRECT TENSION BETWEEN THE TWO COMMUNIST GIANTS IS AT ONE OF ITS LOWEST POINTS SINCE THE 1969 USSURI RIVER CLASHES. SOVIET CONCERNS OVER ENHANCED SINO-SOVIET TENSIONS WOULD MOUNT IF VIETNAM WERE TO ESCALATE SHARPLY THE CONFLICT, ESPECIALLY IF HANOI DECIDES TO MARCH ON PHNOM PENH IN AN OPEN BID TO OVERTHROW THE KHMER GOVERNMENT. IF THIS HYPO-THETICAL SCENARIO SHOULD MATERILIZE, THE SOVIETS WOULD CLOSELY WATCH THE CHINESE REACTON AND COULD UALIFY THEIR SUPPORT DEPENDING ONTHEIR READING OF HOW VIGOROUSLY PEKING WOULD REACT. THE UNATTRACTIVE-NESS OF THIS SCENARIO AND ITS NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES IN TERMS OF SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS, ALONG WITH FACTORS LISTED PARA TWO, ARE THE MAIN INCENTIVES BEHIND MOSCOW'S PRESENT POSTURE OF URGING A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT EVEN WHILE SUPPORTING HANOI'S POLICY.
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